

The Georg Jensen Company

A look at the history of Georg Jensen's jewellery designs.

by Ed Martel



Georg Jensen, c1904, in his late twenties.

Georg Jensen - the name is synonymous with style. Established in 1904, and still in production today, the jewellery designs from the Georg Jensen Company smithy are instantly recognisable. Many readers will have glanced at the front cover of *Antiques Info* and immediately noticed at least two Jensen pieces (my guess is that you have just had another look - did you notice all eight, including the design for the brooch from circa 1900?).



'Dragonfly' belt buckle, designed by Georg Jensen, 1903-1904. Silver and opals.

Keeping up with trends, the Georg Jensen Company's style developed many times. First came naturalistic pieces in the 'Skønvirke', or 'fairwork' style, a parochial version of Art Nouveau popular in Denmark around the beginning of the twentieth century. One example being the fantastic dragonfly belt buckle executed in silver with cabochon cut opals in 1903-1904. Jensen's jewellery designs often employed motifs depicting stylised flowers, leaves, birds and other aspects of the natural world. His affinity with nature and the depictions of flora and fauna in much of his work were first inspired by his childhood experiences.

Born in 1899 to a brazier in a knife factory and a housemaid, Jensen spent his early

years in the small Danish town of Rådvald, near Copenhagen, described by Jensen as

"paradise on earth, the most magnificent woods...Beautiful was the old marshland; I am sure that it has left its mark on the rest of my life".

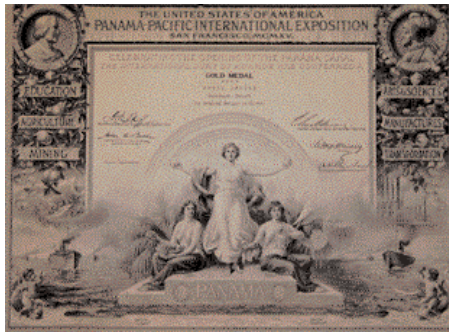
In an interview looking back at his fantastically successful career, when asked about the purpose of art, Jensen replied

"people worry too much about purpose. The object must...absorb the most beautiful abstracts from the nature that surrounds us."



Brooch, circa 1910. Silver and moonstone. Many of the designs had a naturalistic influence

Although popular items of the Georg Jensen Company's jewellery continued to be made even years after the examples were first crafted, designs produced by the Sølvsmiede (silversmithy) began to develop around the end of the First World War into more minimal, less adorned designs concurrent with the emerging Art Deco movement. This development in style coincided with great expansion for the company, and followed success in the USA at the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in 1915 San Francisco, where the company was awarded the highly prestigious Gold Award. 1918 to 1926 - years of prosperity following some periods of difficulty during the war - saw the establishment of a number of Jensen retail shops, under the company name of Georg Jensen & Wendel A/S. These included Paris in 1918, London in 1921, New York in 1924, Barcelona in 1925 and Berlin in 1926.



Gold Medal certificate awarded to the Georg Jensen Company in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition for "Original Designs in Silver".

From the mid 1920s on Jensen, now in his fifties, became increasingly dissatisfied with his role in the company; despite the

success of the firm, Jensen was increasingly having to act the businessman rather than the designer and silversmith. Perhaps attempting to regain this earlier role, Jensen set up a small workshop in Paris in 1924, but was soon persuaded to return to Copenhagen and given the position of 'artistic supervisor' in 1926. Apparently still unhappy, Jensen spent less and less time at work and was instead to be found in his own private workshop where he practised his artistic passion, gifting the items he made to friends and relatives.



'Adam & Eve' belt buckle, 1899. Designed and made by Georg Jensen. Silver and gilt silver. One of the first pieces of jewellery made by Jensen, compare with the dragonfly.

Perhaps as a result of his increasing departure from the business, we see Jensen designs developing once more around the late 1920s and early 1930s to a more abstract, modernist style, yet still in keeping with the designs which originally emanated during the early years. This development is still apparent in the wonderful flatware and hollowware pieces still being crafted today by the Georg Jensen Company.



Vase designed by Georg Jensen for P Ipsens Enke, 1899. Glazed earthenware. Jensen worked here for a few years creating designs for production pieces of glazed terracotta.

Jensen viewed himself primarily as a craftsman, then as an artist. Apprentices - of which he had many - often commented on his intense, artistic temperament and the fact that many of his jewellery designs were drawn on scraps of card and paper as if he had used the nearest drawing materials to hand. Commenting on the unique design of his pieces, Jensen explains in one interview:

“Generally, artists before me have not learned or performed a specific trade or craft. I think that has been my great advantage - that I was a craftsman first and an artist second.” Indeed, many would be surprised to learn that Jensen’s first love - and very nearly his entire career - was sculpture.



'My Father' by Georg Jensen, 1886-1887. Plaster. The quality of this piece was instrumental in winning Jensen the chance to sit entrance exams to the Kunstakademiet in 1892.

In 1880, aged 14, Jensen was apprenticed to a small goldsmiths firm in Copenhagen, and meanwhile took additional classes in drawing, engraving, geometry and modelling. In 1887, executed in his spare time, he completed a fine plaster bust of his father; a piece which helped Jensen to win a scholarship to study sculpture at the Kunstakademiet (the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts), from which he graduated in 1892. He was a skilled sculptor, and for a time the success of his pieces allowed him to concentrate fully in this field, and even to take visits to various museums, workshops and exhibitions across Europe. Jensen and then business partner Joachim Petersen were invited to exhibit a selection

of their ceramics at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where they were awarded an honourable mention - a high accolade for such a small and recently established firm. The firm was soon to fold however, and in 1901 Jensen instead joined the art-metal workshop Mogens Ballin as foreman. Ballin, a Danish painter and more besides, “wanted to make articles for everyday use, of beautiful form, executed in bronze, pewter, polished copper and other cheap metals. It is my intention” he explained, “to make things that even the smallest purse can afford.”



Georg Jensen catalogue, 1908-1912.

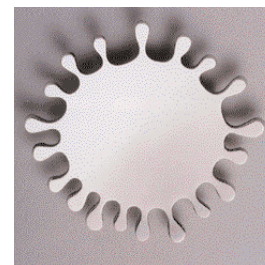
It was here that Jensen designed and produced the dragonfly buckle, exhibited at the Kleis Gallery in Copenhagen. Jensen continued to design more jewellery for Ballin, and in 1904, with Ballin’s blessing incidentally, Jensen decided it was time to seek financial support and set up his own silver-smithy. According to the first catalogue of his own designs, produced between 1908 and 1912, it appears that the most popular designs were those which were small and most widely affordable: brooches, buckles and hair combs. Jensen’s use of silver as opposed to gold, and semi-precious opals,

agate, lapis lazuli, mother of pearl etc as opposed to diamonds and sapphires followed Ballin’s Arts & Crafts philosophy of simplicity and affordability. This said, Jensen’s unique ability was to add to these his unique and original style which could only be obtained through good design and skillful hand craftsmanship.

When Jensen died in October 1935, his artistic genius was noted in the English design magazine *The Studio*:

“Denmark has lost one of her most illustrious sons, and the world one of its most creative craftsmen.”

Following his death, the two arms of the Georg Jensen Company - production and retail - continued to flourish, a testament to Jensen’s skillful and prolific teaching of his talents to apprentices. In 1972, keeping its name, the Georg Jensen Company was bought by the Royal Porcelain Manufactory PLC, becoming part of the Royal Copenhagen PLC in 1985. The Georg Jensen Company still produces jewellery, holloware and flatware today, including reproductions of past pieces (‘Heritage’ designs) as well as new, modern designs, although as the price guide which follows suggests, original is still best!



Brooch designed by Bent Gabrielsen, circa 1971. Made by the Georg Jensen Company. Silver.



Die punch, matrix, unfinished parts and completed brooch. Cast iron, silver. And inset brooch designed by Georg Jensen 1914. Silver and moonstone.



Necklace designed by Georg Jensen, 1914. Silver.



Close up, back of bracelet featuring a GJ stamp. Designed by Georg Jensen circa 1908. Silver.



Pendant, circa 1881-1886, made during Jensen’s apprenticeship to A R Andersen, a goldsmiths firm in Copenhagen. One of Jensen’s first metal designs and executions.

